

The Highland Council
Community Services Committee

5 February 2015

Agenda Item	8
Report No	COM 5/15

Communication and Engagement with Communities

Report by the Director of Community Services

Summary

This report informs and updates Members on outcomes from the round of Evening Forums completed in December 2014 and how the key outcomes will be delivered going forward

1. Background

- 1.1 A series of 9 Community Services open evenings was completed in December 2014 when the Chairman, Director and members of Community Services SMT met with communities to consider how we can better communicate with communities and what communities could do more of themselves.
- 1.2 The events took place in Wick, Kingussie, Dingwall, Tain, Inverness, Fort William, Portree, Nairn and Brora.
- 1.3 In total 102 people attended the events with the biggest attendances in Dingwall (24), Brora (19), and Tain (16). In addition, there was a good turnout from local Members and at least 2 officers from Community Services also in attendance at each event.
- 1.4 Following presentations from the Chairman and Director, breakout groups were established and each group was asked to agree up to 3 key things they believe would improve communication between Community Services and communities, and up to 3 key things communities could do more of for themselves.

2. Improving Communications with Communities

- 2.1 The following points were recorded by more than 3 breakout groups:
 - useful to have a key contact person within the Service to act as a link for communities and Elected Members;
(it was also felt a key contact person with Community Councils would help)
 - respond to correspondence in a timely, full and open manner;
(it is interesting to note that on several occasions the point was made that people do not mind hearing something cannot be done as long as it is properly explained. Their biggest concern was not hearing back at all or partial answers to queries).
 - necessity for the Council's CRM system to be properly used; and
(the CRM system was explained and on the whole generally understood, but actions should not be closed without the activity being complete)
 - direct access to staff via telephone.
(it was explained that this was not possible and how the service centre/CRM system was designed to work. This was accepted generally by the point reiterated about having a key contact person and communications needing

to be much better)

2.2 Key Actions from this

Placing greater emphasis on communications and customer care is a key driver for change within the Service's new Workforce Planning Action Plan (the subject of a separate report to this committee). This has three key actions:

1. The new Area structure has been designed to be more responsive and customer-focussed at the local level. Through our Workforce Positive Action Plan we will 'empower staff to take decisions that deliver responsive and timely services to communities within budget'. At the Area level this involves a key role for Community Works Officers in particular and a training programme for them is already underway. During February, Area Managers will be sharing with Members and Community Councils who does what in each area, and how this will improve communications and service delivery.
2. A piece of work is already underway to seek to increase the number of Community Service enquiries and complaints that are dealt with at the first point of contact through the Council's Service Centre. This means that only those more complicated enquiries will need to go through the CRM system and back to the Service for completion.
3. Specific training has already been set up for all front-line staff and managers to ensure that a 'can do' culture runs through the whole Service.

3. **What communities could do more of for themselves**

- 3.1 Those in attendance found this task much more difficult as there seemed a general reluctance to commit without a clear understanding of what the Council would/could do to support and enable such a commitment from communities. There was suspicion that the Council perhaps just wanted to offload stuff they could no longer deliver as a result of budget pressures and cuts.
- 3.2 Whilst this was acknowledged by the Chairman and Director during discussions, in the interests of full openness and transparency, it was explained to communities that the Council was faced with difficult choices. However, it was also explained that we genuinely want to work with communities to deliver better services locally.
- 3.3 It was felt the Council should work closer with communities to enable them to take over the running of assets. Discussion followed in some of the meetings on the use of the Community Challenge Fund to support, for example, grass cutting, toilet cleaning, and recycling.
- 3.4 It was difficult to get much consensus, but there was some agreement from the breakout groups on the following points:
 - support for winter resilience;
 - grass cutting/gardening/flower bed maintenance; and
 - care of community toilets, in particular through the Highland Comfort Scheme.
- 3.5 Empowering and supporting communities to do more themselves is a clear commitment from the Council. Community Services staff are well placed to support this going forward, particularly through the key actions described in section 1.6.

4. Implications

- 4.1 There are no known resource, legal, climate change/Carbon Clever, equalities, Gaelic or rural implications associated with the proposals contained in this report.

Recommendations

The Committee is invited to note the outcomes from the round of Community Services Evening Forums and how these outcomes link to Workforce Planning and structural changes at area level

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